

Troops will receive holiday messages

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By: Associated Press

JACKSONVILLE, N.C. -- Some North Carolina troops deployed overseas will have the chance this holiday season to view their children decked out in turkey costumes or their wives just saying hello in messages sent over the Internet.

Through a program called Operation Best Wishes, 72 families will be able to create messages that only their loved one can view. Families recorded messages Monday at the Marine Federal Credit Union headquarters and were scheduled to do so again Tuesday.

Rebekah Burnett said that since her daughters loved a tape that their father, Lance Cpl. Ricky Burnett, made for them before he deployed, she thought the girls would enjoy recording the video for him.

"A phone call is only so much," said Rebekah Burnett, whose husband is deployed to Iraq with 2nd Battalion, 2nd Marines.

Under Operation Best Wishes, Marines serving in Iraq or Afghanistan can use an Internet workstation and an access code to log onto a Web site retrieve the message.

Some also get the chance to view the message live and interact by sending text messages that can be relayed to the family right right away.

Credit union WesCorp and CIA Studios first organized the event in 2004 for credit union families in southern California. This year, the Thanksgiving portion is being held at Camp Lejeune and at the Navy Federal Credit Union in Norfolk, Va.

During the Christmas holidays, Operation Best Wishes heads back to southern California with recording sessions scheduled in December at North Island Credit Union, Coronado Naval Station; and Pacific Marine Credit Union, Camp Pendleton Marine Base.

"One of the things that we're learning is that (families) can never get enough," said Walter Laskos, a WesCorp spokesman. "Of course, they would want to talk every day. With this technology, the communication tends to be a lot better. It's not just an e-mail, it's not talking on the phone, it's something more."

Craig Chamberlin, president of Marine Federal Credit Union, said the event is about treating their members right.

"We are a strong believer in family," said Chamberlin. "We go to great lengths to take care of our own."

Chamberlin stood in to watch the next recording, which featured Rebekah Burnett holding her 3-month-old daughter, Makayla, whom her husband has never seen.

"See?" she said, holding her gooey hand up to the camera after the baby spit up. "Look Daddy. Look what you're missing. All the fun stuff."



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While the cameras rolled, Burnett tried to explain to her other daughter, 2-year-old Alexia, what was going on. Alexia glared at the cameras and clutched her doll, which had her father's picture on it.

"We're going to send it to Makayla's daddy and your daddy," Rebekah told Alexia. "Where's Daddy at? At work. Tell him we'll see you in February, we hope."

Just before signing off, Burnett finally got Alexia to wave to the camera. "Tell Daddy bye," Burnett said. "Blow him a kiss."

Benita Rodriguez also sat in the camera lights Monday, holding her young daughter Isabella and laughing about the costume her son, Noel Jr., was putting on. Noel Jr. was becoming a Thanksgiving turkey for his dad, Staff Sgt. Noel Rodriguez.

She stopped laughing and stared into the camera, waiting for the go-ahead. Someone held up five fingers and began counting down.

"Five, four, three, two, one."

Then the tears came.

"Hi, dad," she said, dabbing at her eyes. "We just wanted to say we miss you, we love you, and we're thinking about you always. God speed. We miss you, and we hope that you see this."

Benita repeated her words a couple times, and Noel gobbled at the camera and waved and smiled.

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